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10-hour boot camp

By **Eric Gorski/The Gazette**

Edited by Mike Braham; headline by Tim Chong

The Rev. Al Pittman wants to welcome gays to his church. Traditionally, he said, many Christians haven't done much more than call gays sinners.

So Pittman, pastor of Calvary Worship Center on Colorado Springs' westside, joined 800 others Saturday at Focus on the Family's Love Won Out conference to learn how to do it.

But he doesn't only want to welcome gays and lesbians. He wants to show them they can change, that homosexuality is something that can be overcome through prayer and therapy.

"We want to be an extension of God's love to the homosexual community and not treat them like lepers," Pittman said. "We've complained about what gay activists are doing, but we've not provided solutions or answers to people."

The answers offered at the conference, the ninth by Focus since 1998, aren't welcomed by everyone. Many medical associations and gay activists condemn the 20-year-old ex-gay movement as psychologically harmful.

Controversy

Most change ministries believe homosexuality is not genetic but instead caused by developmental factors such as exposure to pornography or poor parenting. Most psychiatrists disagree.

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About 50 people organized by a local gay church gathered at Focus' entrance to protest as the conference ended.

Focus on the Family was in the uncomfortable position of staging the conference just weeks after John Paulk, one of the event's key organizers, was seen in a gay bar in Washington, D.C.

Paulk, an avowed former gay, has insisted he was relieving stress, not going back to homosexuality.

He spoke briefly to open the conference, thanking people for their support, and appeared on stage with his two sons after his wife's tearful testimony about leaving lesbianism. Paulk was to be a featured speaker before the gay-bar incident.

The conference itself was a 10-hour boot camp mostly for pastors, parents and friends of people who, in the words of organizers, are "struggling with homosexuality."

Joseph Nicolosi, an advocate of using therapy to try to change a person's orientation from homosexual to heterosexual, described how to keep boys from becoming gay. He suggested sleepovers as a way for boys to "solidify their gender identity" and told parents to intervene immediately if their sons play with dolls.

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Mike Haley, a Focus youth and gender specialist, said Christians need to rethink their language to reach gays.

"The homosexual lifestyle" is

"homosexuality." He also said people should remove their "plastic Christian smiles" and share their own life struggles with gays to communicate no one's perfect.

Maggie Johnson, a 25-year-old Chicago college student, said such advice will help her with kids she counsels.

"If someone is cool with being gay, I'm not going to try to change that," she said. "But there are a lot of youth who do want to change."

Outside, protesters organized by Pikes Peak Metropolitan Community Church held candles for people who've killed themselves or hurt themselves because they were unable to reconcile their homosexuality and spirituality.

"The church of Jesus Christ, the universal church, exists to bring healing and hope, not division," pastor Nori Rost said.

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